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## **NASA, supporters vow program will endure But crash is another blow to space station's future**

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**Washington** -- Supporters of a U.S. manned space exploration program that has been diminished by years of cost overruns, budget restraints and technical setbacks rallied around NASA Saturday after the 22-year-old shuttle Columbia exploded.

The loss of the oldest of the four space shuttles comes on top of cutbacks to the international space station program and last year's cancellation of the X-33 -- a project to build a reusable manned rocket -- that had forced the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to scale back its future goals.

But from President Bush on down, backers who said the space program has brought tremendous scientific discoveries vowed it will endure.

"Our journey into space will go on," Bush said from the White House after the explosion killed all seven crew members.

When Bush unveils his budget proposal for the coming fiscal year on Monday, he is expected to ask Congress to give NASA about \$15 billion, about the same amount as its current budget. Less than half of that goes to manned space programs. The space program also gets financial support from the Pentagon, which is increasingly interested in military aspects of space travel.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Huntington Beach, chairman of the House space subcommittee, said he hopes the tragedy reminds his colleagues and the public that the space program needs more money and attention.

"We're going to correct the mistakes . . . but, we have to know that space policy has got to come off the back burner," Rohrabacher said Saturday night in an interview with CNN. "Space policy for the last 10 years hasn't been given the attention it deserves.

### **MODERNIZING FLEET**

Bush's NASA director, Sean O'Keefe, has undertaken an overhaul of the agency's program for manned space exploration.

NASA's new plan calls for long-term development of an Orbital Space Plane, which agency officials hoped by 2010 would fly astronauts without cargo to and from the 16-nation international space station. The program replaced the X-33, canceled last year after NASA and its partner, Lockheed Martin, spent nearly \$1.4 billion in the failed attempt to build a reusable rocket.

But other plans, including a program to extend the life of the diminished three-ship shuttle fleet until 2020 and a heavier shuttle flight schedule to serve the space station, have been called into question by the Columbia's loss.

The remaining shuttles -- Endeavour, Discovery and Atlantis -- are the main vehicles used to serve the space station. The Columbia disaster means the shuttles will be grounded until answers are found, so until they return to duty the space station will rely on Russia's aging shuttles to ferry crews and supplies as it orbits Earth.

The space station itself has been a victim of NASA's budget woes and Russia's financial problems. Original plans called for a multinational crew of seven astronauts, but that has been slashed to three. Instead of concentrating on experiments, the trio spend most of their time maintaining the station.

Ironically, NASA's plans also called for spending hundreds of millions of dollars on safety upgrades to the U.S. shuttles. This effort has already begun.

Last year Congress provided \$207 million extra for shuttle safety, but it's not immediately known what work was done on the Columbia, which was on its 28th mission into space when it exploded.

The agency's current plan had anticipated the shuttles each would be used for 100 flights.

Discovery, the oldest of NASA's remaining vehicles, has been in service for 18 years. Endeavour, built at a cost of about \$2 billion to replace Challenger after that spacecraft exploded shortly after takeoff on Jan. 28, 1986, has been flying for a decade. Atlantis has been in use for 17 years.

"We will not fly again until we have this understood," said Ron Ditemore, NASA's shuttle program manager. An independent commission has been named to look into the disaster, as was done after the Challenger explosion.

"This disaster doesn't deter my support for the space program," said Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, a member of the House Science Committee.

"The space program has so much to do with progress and human curiosity about what goes on out there. That will remain strong," he said.

Honda said Congress will seek answers in an effort to improve the program.

## **FINDING 'PHYSICAL LIMITS'**

"We need to have new equipment, and continue our support for the space program. We need to find the physical limits of the materials used on our space vehicles and we need to make sure the vehicles we put our astronauts on are safe," he added.

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